



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

MAY.

1901.

ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN ACADEMY

OF
POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE.

AN Isthmian Canal, From a Military Point of View.

Assuming that an Isthmian canal will be built by the United States, the question arises how can it be made to subserve the best interests of the government from a military point of view. Should it be free to the vessels of all nations on the same terms, in war as well as in peace, or should it be controlled by military power so that its use by our enemies in time of war could be prevented?

It is not proposed to discuss the cost of putting the canal under military control nor the ways and means of so doing. It will be assumed that it can be put under military control, or that it can be made free at the pleasure of the United States.

An Isthmian canal cannot be built within much less than ten years. What the relative naval strength of the various powers will be at the end of that period it is impossible to tell. Moreover, it is not easy to assign the proper place to some of the naval powers to-day. One nation may be strong in defensive but relatively weak in offensive power. The number, size and power of battleships and cruisers may not furnish the correct data for assignment of place. Naval

training and geographical positions are important considerations. The sub-marine boat is an unknown factor. But judging by the official lists, the principal naval powers have not greatly altered their relative positions in the last ten years. The United States and Japan have forged ahead; Spain and Italy have fallen behind. The eight strongest naval powers stand about as follows:

1. Great Britain,
2. France,
3. Russia,
4. United States,
5. Germany,
6. Italy,
7. Japan,
8. Spain.

Of these Great Britain and France are decidedly stronger than the United States. Russia, the United States and Germany are approximately equal; and all others decidedly inferior.

War may take place between the United States and any of the other named powers, or combinations of two or more, or it might be with one of those allied to some weak power not in that list. It is impossible to foretell all the combinations that might arise, but it is probable that, if an alliance of any two or more Powers should make war against the United States, we also would have allies; so that in dealing with the question we shall consider only the cases of war between the United States and a single Power.

Let us suppose a war exists between the United States and some nation of inferior naval power: What effect would the existence of the canal have on the operations of either belligerent? The nature of the operations both of the United States and of the enemy would depend largely on the geographical position of that enemy, the more or less maritime character of the people, and the value of her commerce and colonial possessions. Our policy would be to

attack her war vessels wherever they could be found, shut them up in harbors by blockade if they could not be reached, bombard naval stations, possibly invade her territory if the conditions favored and the probable results justified it.

Japan, a young and vigorous naval power, occupies a favorable geographical position to operate against us in the far east, and is fairly well provided with modern cruisers for attacking our commerce in the Pacific. An attack on the Philippines is within the limits of probability. If successful, Japan might even make a naval demonstration as far eastward as our Pacific coast, but it is difficult to understand how a condition of affairs could arise that would make it desirable for her to send a fleet through an American-Isthmian canal to the Atlantic side: such an event could only happen in case our navy in the Pacific were destroyed, and that on the Atlantic side perilously weak—a condition, which it is safe to assume, is not likely to arise in a war with Japan.

As for the European nations that are inferior to us in naval power, none are capable of conducting important naval operations against us on either the Atlantic or Pacific sides of the United States, and none are provided with naval bases of supply in such proximity as to cause us any alarm. Some of them might send out cruisers to prey on our commerce, but they would not be sent through an American Isthmian canal to do so.

Of the republics of South and Central America it may be said, first that they do not possess sufficient naval strength to give us any concern, and second that their interests are so closely interwoven with ours that war between any of them and the United States is scarcely probable. But if it should occur, none of them would send their war ships through an Isthmian canal. The greatest danger would be in the possibility of the canal being damaged by a few men, and this danger would be greater if the canal were fortified than if it were neutral.

It is safe, therefore, to conclude, that in a war between the United States and a nation of inferior naval power, the canal would be of no value to our enemy under any circumstances, while a neutral canal would be as serviceable to the United States as one thoroughly fortified.

The nations that are approximately equal to the United States in naval strength are Russia, Germany and Italy. Measured by tonnage the first of these has a navy about 25 per cent larger than that of the United States; measured by number of vessels, it is more than double that of the United States. But Russia is so situated geographically that operations against us could only be carried on at a disadvantage. She has a position at Vladivostock which is reported as being strongly fortified. It will soon have railroad connection with the capital of the empire and will become an important base in the East. It lies uncomfortably close to the Philippine Islands, which are far removed from the support of the United States. The harbor of Vladivostock, however, is impaired by climatic conditions. The cold is so intense that the harbor is closed by ice for several months in the year. To reach the Philippine Islands and our commerce in the Pacific, the Suez route for Russia is shorter, better and less liable to interruption than one via an American Isthmian canal.

The geographical position of Italy is not good for conducting hostile operations against the United States. Like Russia, she has neither coaling nor supply stations on this side of the Atlantic. In tonnage she is below, but in number of war vessels she is above, the United States. She has an immense fleet of torpedo boats, a comparatively small number of fast cruisers, and is far behind the United States in modern built ships. Some of her battleships a few years ago were regarded as the most formidable afloat, as they carried the largest guns in existence. But these ships are not well adapted to operating at a long distance from a base.

It is difficult to see how Italy could do us much harm on

the Atlantic side. A swift cruiser might capture some of our merchant vessels, but that Italy should contemplate sending a fleet through an American Isthmian canal to the Pacific is preposterous. Should she make a naval demonstration in those waters it should be in the extreme western part, most probably in the vicinity of the Philippine Islands, and for this purpose the Suez route is shorter, safer and in every way better. Italy is more of a commercial nation than Russia, but her commerce does not amount to much, consisting chiefly of fishing vessels that never go far away from home. She has no important colonies. Those in Eastern Africa are not of sufficient importance to warrant the cost of an expedition for their capture, and their loss to Italy would not have an important influence on the war.

Germany and the United States are more nearly on an equality in naval strength than any other two important naval powers. In tonnage they are nearly equal, in modern built ships the United States is ahead. Germany has, however, a great number of torpedo boats and many of her cruisers are what are known as unprotected. The naval program of Germany would make her the superior of France in fifteen years if the latter remain stationary. In other words, she would become in 1916 the second maritime power of the world, if her program be carried out and if the navies of other nations do not advance. Germany, however, has no colonies or supply stations on the Atlantic side of the United States in close proximity to our shores; her nearest colony is in Africa, too far removed to be of much use in a war with the United States even if it were otherwise advantageous.

On the Pacific side Germany has supply stations but they are few and far from the shores of the United States; but to attack us on that side Germany would not use an American Isthmian canal. The Suez route is better and less liable to be interrupted.

In the late war, Spain and the United States were generally

considered to be approximately equal in naval strength, yet an Isthmian canal, whether free or fortified, would not have rendered the results more decided nor have hastened the conclusion. Neither Dewey's victory at Manila nor Sampson's at Santiago could have been made more complete by the existence of a canal, nor could the operations of our armies have been facilitated. The *Oregon* might have reached the scene of operations sooner, but that would not have helped matters as the sequel proved. If the canal had been in existence and *partially* fortified, it would have been considered a vulnerable point of attack, particularly when Cervera's fleet was on the way across the ocean. A detachment of a part of our fleet to assist in the defence might have become necessary. In that case the blockade of Havana could not, in all probability, have been made effective.

In a war, then, between the United States and any nation of approximately equal naval strength, the canal would not be used by our enemy, while a neutral canal would be as useful to the United States as a fortified one.

There are only two nations whose naval strength is decidedly superior to that of the United States, these are France and Great Britain. The total naval tonnage of the former is nearly double that of ours, but much of it is in vessels of an old type. Fort de France, on the Island of Martinique, one of the Windward Islands on the east side of the Caribbean Sea, is a commodious, deep-water harbor. In old times it was a strongly fortified place and is susceptible now of being made impregnable against naval attack. It affords a fine rendezvous for a French fleet within striking distance of the canal.

If the canal were fortified France, under the laws of war, would have the right to capture, destroy or blockade it, if she could, but naval control of the Caribbean Sea would be necessary for its capture or blockade. Whether or not France would wish to do either, would depend on circumstances. If she did, a struggle would necessarily take place for naval

supremacy in the Caribbean Sea. But if the canal were neutral France, without a violation of the laws of war, could neither blockade, destroy nor capture it. She would therefore have less reason to strive for supremacy in the Caribbean, and the United States would get the full use of the canal without the necessity of fortifying it.

Would France wish to use the canal in case it were neutral and she became victorious in a combat on the Caribbean Sea? We think not, her victorious fleets would undoubtedly have a short route to the Pacific coast, but she would not be likely to send them through it. If an accident happened to the canal while she depended on it as a line of communication, her fleets would be placed in an awkward predicament. Moreover, there is better game on the eastern side more easily reached. On the other hand, if we became the victors in an engagement on the sea, the enemy's fleet would fall back on Martinique or re-cross the Atlantic; but it is not probable that a beaten French fleet would try to escape through an Isthmian canal westward, even if it were freely open. In operating against the Philippines France would use the Suez Canal.

Great Britain is by far the most formidable naval power in the world, whether measured by tonnage displacement, by number of ships, by weight of armor, or gun power. Her tonnage at the present time is nearly five times that of the United States, and more than double that of any two nations of the world combined. Her ships are of the latest types and the personnel of her fleet is in a high state of efficiency.

Great Britain is a commercial nation and dependent on the outside world for her subsistence. Her foremost object would be to keep open her avenues of trade, destroy everything that could threaten them, and render her adversary incapable of interfering with them. In a war with the United States, her first aggressive operations would doubtless be on the Atlantic side, for which Great Britain is well provided with good bases in close proximity to our shore.

Halifax is near our northern coast, Bermuda is distant only about eight hundred miles east from Charleston, while the Bahamas and Kingston are close to the southern coast. These stations form a cordon around our coast which would menace the operations of our navy, and from which Great Britain could operate against our coastwise commerce at her leisure.

If the canal were fortified a garrison would be stationed there. To keep open communications between it and the United States would become a matter of the most vital concern. To destroy those communications would therefore be an object of the highest importance to Great Britain. She could afford to weaken herself temporarily at other points in order to accomplish this, and we would be compelled to concentrate the bulk of our navy in the Caribbean Sea to maintain them. With five battleships to our one, and with Kingston, a deep, well-fortified and commodious harbor, as a base of operations, Great Britain would have every chance in her favor.

The Caribbean Sea would thus at first become the chief theatre of war on the Atlantic side, and the canal itself a military outpost, which could only be reinforced by troops conveyed to it by water. Now, a navy to be efficient, must have freedom of action. If it be fettered with the task of keeping open this line of communications in the face of a powerful foe, its efficiency would be lowered, if not destroyed.

We could not depend on maintaining communication on the west side with our Pacific seaports. This line is too long and too easily broken. That Great Britain might eventually capture the canal is not beyond the range of possibility. The fact that it would be a most valuable prize, and its loss to the United States so detrimental to our interests as well as our prestige, would induce Great Britain to exert her utmost powers. If by any unfortunate circumstance adequate defences or sufficient troops were not pro-

vided prior to the breaking out of war, the capture of the canal might become comparatively easy to a nation in control of the sea on each side.

An Isthmian canal to be of service to the United States presupposes that passage to it, through it and from it is assured. But passage to or from it in case of war with a strong naval power, could only be maintained by a strong naval force. If the canal bristled with guns from one end to the other it would be of no use to the United States, while a powerful hostile fleet dominated the Caribbean Sea. The nation that controls the adjoining seas will, in time of war, control passage through the canal, no matter which one has possession.

The canal will be located in a region that is practically uninhabited. A few resolute men could disable it with little danger to themselves. This danger of being temporarily disabled is a serious one even in a war with a weak naval power. The destruction of a lock or embankment, which could be accomplished with a few pounds of dynamite, would bring about a total suspension of navigation for an indefinite period.

Suppose France owned, controlled and managed the Suez Canal, what advantage would she derive from its being fortified in case of a war with Great Britain? Simply that of being able to deny its use to Great Britain, a negative benefit the value of which is more than doubtful. The canal would become a military outpost impossible to reinforce unless the British Mediterranean fleet could be destroyed or evaded. The concentration of British fleets might be somewhat delayed, but that is all. The mere ability to force delay would not be decisive. Great Britain in control of the Mediterranean and Red Seas, would control the approaches, and though she could not send her own fleets through it, she could effectually prevent France from reaching it. France would thus be placed in the position of holding a military station of no value to herself, that she could neither abandon

without loss of prestige, nor make her hold on secure by reinforcements.

The same would hold true with reference to an American Isthmian canal in a war between the United States and Great Britain. Perhaps Great Britain could not capture the canal. She might not wish to, but by blockading it she could destroy its usefulness to the United States.

From a military standpoint the canal is valuable only as a shortened line of communication. It has no other value. It does not serve as a good base of operations in a war with a strong naval power. It occupies no threatening position in a war with Great Britain. No prudent naval commander would hold a fleet in Lake Nicaragua or Lake Bohia to spring out on the foe in either ocean, as has sometimes been suggested. If our enemy be weak it would not be necessary, if strong, the danger of being bottled up is too great.

The canal is simply a link in the chain of communications. No chain is stronger than its weakest link. Forge it as you will, the weak link in a war with a stronger naval power than ourselves, is on either side. Munitions of war and troops would ordinarily be transported across the continent by rail, as that is a more expeditious route. As a line of communications it is badly located when considered in a war with a superior naval power. Instead of being in a protected position behind the main line of defense, it is out beyond the skirmish line.

An adequate defense of a fortified Isthmian canal can be made in no other way than by providing a navy of sufficient power to control the seas at either terminus. With such a navy at our command, the canal needs no fortifications. What number of battleships, cruisers, etc., would be necessary to accomplish this end, we do not feel competent to estimate; that is a question for naval experts to determine.

Suppose, on the other hand, the canal were neutral. It

would not then become a prize of war. Neither the maintenance of an army to protect it nor of a fleet to keep open communications with it, would be necessary. Great Britain might possibly send ships through it, but even that is doubtful. The most that could be gained by doing so is a saving of time. Under some circumstances this might be an important matter. But the naval preponderance of Great Britain is such that time would be of less importance to her than to us. It is scarcely probable that it would ever be so important to her as to justify her in taking the risks of sending a fleet through a canal under American control.

The canal is of more value to the United States than to any other nation. To keep it and the approaches open at all times would therefore be the aim of our government. But no amount of fortifications along the line of the canal will afford safe passage to a ship across the Caribbean Sea.

It is believed, in consideration of the freedom of the canal extended by the United States to the ships of all nations, that those nations would agree to an arrangement by which the region of the canal and large areas of the sea at each terminus should be exempted from the operations of war. The larger these areas of neutrality the better. But in view of the benefits to mankind which the United States would confer by the construction of the canal, there ought to be no serious difficulty in securing areas of the sea bounded by arcs of circles described with radii of, say, 100 miles or more. Should such an agreement be violated by any nation that is a party to it, the United States could destroy the canal, if necessary, so as to render it impossible of being used against us. As no nation except Great Britain would wish to use the canal for any other than peaceful purposes of commerce, and as she probably would have no strong reason for using it in any other way, it is not seen why such an agreement might not be made. How such a status of the canal and adjacent waters can be effected are matters for

statecraft to settle. The object of the foregoing remarks is to endeavor to show that a neutral canal with a large area of neutral waters at each terminus, is, in the existing status of the naval powers of the world, a more useful canal to the United States, from a military standpoint, than one that is controlled by military power.

PETER C. HAINS.

Baltimore, Md.